

THE MYSTERY OF *CHINATOWN*

On a basic level, a mystery is a search for concealed information. The audience plays along, digging up clues and trying to solve the crime before the detective gathers all of the suspects and says, "One of you is the killer."

I love a mystery. From John Dickson Carr's locked rooms to Raymond Chandler's private eyes, the challenge of assembling the clues and solving the puzzle before the detective does is exhilarating. Most of the scripts I've sold have been either thrillers or action, but at their hearts they were mysteries with suspects, clues and red herrings. Mysteries are currently out of favor on the big screen, but the techniques of planting clues, creating mystery and identifying suspects can be used in other genres—from thrillers to rom-coms ... and maybe mysteries will make a comeback.

Let's take a look at one of the great mysteries, Robert Towne's 1974 film *Chinatown*. Directed by Roman Polanski, starring Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway and John Huston, it's a film that still works over 30 years after its release. The story is about a Chandleresque private detective Jake Gittes (Nicholson), hired by the wife of Hollis Mulwray, the head of Los Angeles' Department of Water and Power, to find out if her husband is having an affair. He ends up uncovering a murder and a plot to control L.A. by taking over its water supply ... plus a shocking family secret.

FAIR PLAY

Mysteries are audience participation stories—puzzles that we try to solve as the story unfolds.

In a thriller the audience is often ahead of the protagonist. They know something that the lead character doesn't know. We may know the protagonist is walking into a trap, or that there's a bomb ticking away under the table, or that the guy in whom they are putting their trust is really the villain. When the audience knows more than the protagonist, *suspense* is created. Suspense is the anticipation of an action.

In a heroic movie, like a James Bond



Jack Nicholson stars as Jake "J.J." Gittes, a private investigator with a tragic past who stumbles into a tangled web of murder and corruption in *Chinatown*, written by Robert Towne.

film, the audience is often behind the protagonist. They don't have all of the information that the lead has. Having more information makes the protagonist seem clever and intelligent.

In a mystery story, the audience plays along, piecing together clues and solving the crime at the same time the detective does. A basic element in mysteries is the "rule of fair play"—any clue given to the detective must also be given to the audience. That way the reader/viewer can participate in the story and solve the mystery. It's not fair to withhold information from the audience. The skill of the mystery writer is to give the audience all of the information they need to solve the crime—without their knowing they possess this information.

FIND A VICTIM

The victim is the most important character in a mystery film. All of the clues and suspects that make up the story come from the victim. Did the victim have any enemies? Who inherits his money? Was he involved in any shady business deals? It all revolves around the victim. That means your victim has to be an interesting person, a person with secrets that can be revealed throughout the course of the investigation.

In *Chinatown*, Hollis Mulwray seems boring on the surface—he's a typical government bureaucrat. But, he ends up the most important man in L.A. when the city finds itself in the middle of a drought. His second-in-command, Russ Yelburton, says Mulwray's not the kind of guy who even

jokes about chasing women ... yet he has a secret mistress. The more Gittes looks into Mulwray's life, the more unusual things he uncovers. The key to a great mystery is a fascinating victim. Dull victims make dull mysteries. How interesting is your victim?

WATCHING THE DETECTIVES

The detective is the second most important character after the victim. He needs to be interesting because he is the protagonist (the movie star role). In *Chinatown*, Jake Gittes is an ex-investigator for the district attorney and he has a tragic past: A woman he was trying to protect in Chinatown was killed, and he blames himself. Now he works as a private investigator specializing in divorce work—taking pictures of cheating spouses. Gittes is also a smart-ass (lots of great dialogue) and dislikes authority: He laughs when a group of farmers lets a herd of sheep loose in city hall at a council meeting. His tragic past comes into play when he becomes romantically involved with the victim's wife, Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway). Is she a suspect ... or the next victim?

INVOLVING THE DETECTIVE

One of the problems with mysteries is that the detective is often detached from the story. A protagonist with no emotional stakes in the story is difficult for the audience to care about, so in *Chinatown* the detective falls in love with a key suspect. The more Gittes investigates Mulwray's murder, the more clues he finds that lead to the woman he's sleeping with. Did she discover that Mulwray was cheating on her and drown him in their fish pond?

Another way to involve the detective is to make him a suspect. In *The Fugitive*, Richard Kimble (Harrison Ford) has to find his wife's killer in order to clear his name. I've used this method in many scripts, combining a man-on-the-run thriller and a mystery by turning one of the suspects into the detective. Now our protagonist has both emotional stakes and physical stakes—if he doesn't figure out who the killer is, he will end up in the gas chamber!

The all-time winner for involving the detective is *D.O.A.* where someone puts slow-acting poison in Frank Bigelow's (Edmond O'Brien) drink ... and then he must find his own murderer before he drops dead. The victim is the detective!

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THE USUAL SUSPECTS

If you decide to make your detective into a suspect, you'll still need to create other suspects ... or your detective is the killer. The audience must be able to keep track of all of the suspects, and that means there aren't going to be a hundred of them. Limited cast = limited suspects = easier for audience to follow + better characters.

Though *Chinatown* takes place in L.A., everyone in the city is not a suspect. All of the suspects are directly connected to the victim. They flow from the victim like little rivers of crime. We have a limited number of suspects. Gittes interviews Mulwray's wife, his ex-partner Noah Cross (John Huston), his second-in-command at the Department of Water and Power, his mysterious mistress, and a couple of people who may be part of the conspiracy to steal L.A.'s water. Every suspect has a logical motive for killing Mulwray, but only one of them committed the crime.

THE PRIME SUSPECT

Not all suspects are created equal. If they were, the detective (and the audience) would be bouncing all over the place and never seeming to make any progress in the case. That would be frustrating. Instead of a scattershot plot, you want to focus on one suspect at a time. The detective will uncover clues that lead to a specific suspect.

In *Chinatown*, Gittes first suspects the victim's wife. At the time her husband was killed she had been on a long horse ride, sweaty and exhausted, as if she'd been moving dead bodies. Then, she tries to pay Gittes off to stop investigating the case. She certainly acts suspicious, and she seems to be hiding something. The more

Gittes investigates, the more clues point to Evelyn. Then, the water bond passes and Gittes begins to think about the possible conspiracy. He goes to the Department of Water and Power and discovers second-in-command Yelburton has already taken over—he's even having the name on the door changed! From this point on, the clues seem to point to Yelburton for a while, and we focus our investigation (and our story) on him. Gittes then discovers that Evelyn's father is Noah Cross, Mulwray's ex-partner. Small world! Now the investigation focuses on Cross for a while, until it shifts back to Evelyn and on to Mulwray's mysterious mistress. By focusing on one suspect at a time, we focus our story.

But, we may want to use a prime suspect as a red herring—leading the audience to believe that one of the suspects is the killer, even when we are focusing on another suspect. Throughout *Chinatown* we keep finding clues that lead to Evelyn Mulwray. Even when Gittes is focusing on another suspect, there are clues pointing to the victim's wife. After making love with Evelyn (mistake!), Gittes follows her to a house in the suburbs where she's keeping Mulwray's mysterious mistress captive, doped up and under guard. When Gittes confronts her about this, she tells him the big family secret—Mulwray's mistress is Evelyn's own sister! Nice story, but Gittes discovers she's an only child. We've always suspected that Evelyn killed her husband, and the evidence keeps piling up! Gittes finds a pair of glasses in the fish pond behind Mulwray's house. Mulwray was found drowned in a reservoir, *without* his glasses. Did Evelyn kill her husband at home and take his body to the reservoir on horseback? Clue after clue leads to the victim's wife.

GETTING A CLUE

The trick to planting the clues that lead to the killer is to keep them from being obvious. You don't want big neon signs pointing at the killer. Keeping clues from being obvious can be tricky because the rule of fair play requires that the clues to the killer be there so that the audience can play along. How do you hide a clue in plain sight? Here are five ways:

1) The Laundry List. When the detective shows up at the crime scene, he finds a whole bunch of clues. Since clues need to be hidden in plain sight, the most

common way to keep the audience from realizing that *this* is the big clue is to plant it with several other clues. Some clues are critical to the crime's solution, others are just things found at the crime scene that lead nowhere (red herrings). If the victim is murdered in his bedroom, imagine all of the things you might find in that bedroom. Some of those things may seem out of place and suspicious, but there are logical reasons why they are there. I have a hammer on my nightstand right now because I was fixing my bedframe. If I were murdered tonight, a detective might find that hammer suspicious. When you hide a real clue in a group of false clues, it's more difficult for the audience to spot.

2) Doesn't Look Like A Clue. When something seems out of place, it's obviously a clue. When something is where it seems to belong, we don't notice it. In *Chinatown*, Mulwray drowns in a reservoir, so the water they pump out of his lungs doesn't look like a clue at all ... except it's *salt water*. That means someone drowned him in the ocean and moved his body. Why wouldn't that person want Mulwray's body found at the ocean? Basically, this method of concealing clues is Poe's *Purloined Letter*—the best place to hide a letter is in a desk with a bunch of other letters.

3) Some Assembly Required. Instead of giving the audience the clue all at once, break it up into parts and give it to the audience a little bit at a time. Each piece may seem innocent; but when you put them all together, we can solve the crime. In *Chinatown* an informant tells Gittes to look in the obituaries of today's newspaper for the name of one of the water-theft conspirators. There are over a dozen names in the obituaries. Which one is the bad guy? Later, Gittes discovers that a handful of people are buying up all of the farmland in the valley for peanuts because there's no water to irrigate crops. When he reads the list to Evelyn, she laughs at the name Jasper Lamar Crabb, and something clicks—he was also one of the names listed in the obituary. It seems that he bought a great deal of property *after* he died! If the clue is cut up into pieces we can't immediately figure out, we have to assemble the parts into the clue first.

4) Looks Like One Thing, Really Another. Kind of like a pun. You have a clue that could be two different things and place it in the context of what it's *not*. In *Chinatown* one of Gittes' assistants hears

suspect Noah Cross arguing with Mulwray the day before he's murdered. What was the argument about? "Apple cores." It ends up they were arguing about Cross' Albacore Club buying up farmland in the valley—a major clue. These types of clues are great because we jump to the wrong conclusion. When we discover the clue is a dead end, we discard it ... when it's the clue that points to the real killer!

5) The Two-Way Clue. A great example is the clue that cracks the case in *Chinatown*: that pair of glasses Gittes finds in the fish pond. He's sure this is proof that Evelyn killed her husband. When he goes to confront her, she's disappeared. Gittes goes to the suburban house where Evelyn was keeping the mistress hostage and finds her packed and ready to catch a train to Mexico. Now we *know* she's the killer. Gittes confronts her with the glasses from the fish pond—her husband's glasses. That's where she killed him. The glasses are proof. Evelyn looks at the glasses and says they weren't her husband's because he didn't wear bifocals. The great clue that was supposed to crack the case no longer proves anything. They aren't Mulwray's glasses.

When we discount the glasses as a clue because they didn't belong to the victim, we are making a huge mistake because the victim isn't the only character who wore glasses. One of the suspects wore glasses ... bifocals! The clue works two ways. Once Gittes realizes this clue is back in play, he confronts the real killer and solves the crime. Well, one of the crimes.

CRIMES COVERING CRIMES

Most mystery films don't have just one mystery, they have two or three. *Chinatown* starts with Mulwray's affair, which leads to his murder. The murder investigation leads to the scheme to control L.A.'s water supply, but the root of all this is crime from the past that connects all of the suspects. Until Gittes uncovers these past events and discovers who is responsible for this long-ago crime, he will not be able to understand the motives for Mulwray's murder and the water conspiracy. The past crime is the trigger for the present events.

Multiple crimes (connected to each other) give suspects reasons to lie. Though Yelburton didn't murder Mulwray, he is involved in the water-theft scheme and lies

to conceal this from Gittes. Even though Evelyn didn't murder her husband, she's involved in that past crime that triggers everything else that happens. By layering one crime over another, we can create a complex story where everyone has something to hide but only one of the suspects is the killer.

Even though mysteries are dormant on the big screen, maybe the audience's recent rejection of big, dumb action movies like *The Island* and *Stealth* indicates they are looking for something new. Maybe a puzzle to solve. Hopefully, the genre will make a comeback—soon—because I love a good mystery. (i)

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